

CIA/OPR/MEMO 73-12-07 EXCAT 2 ~~SECRET~~ SYRIA'S RULERS AND THEIR POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

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EXCAT 2

MICROFILMED

7 December 1973

MEMORANDUM:

SUBJECT : Syria's Rulers and Their Political Environment

The Men

Syria's leaders are soldiers, socialists, and from the provinces rather than the big cities. They are also relatively young, mostly in their early forties. Each of these characteristics effects the nature, outlook, and policies of the government in Damascus.

The *army* has been the principal agent of political change in Syria since that country achieved its independence at the end of World War II, ruling directly or in association with political groups for most of that time. Once celebrated for the frequency of its military revolts, Syria is no longer the erratic coup-prone cockpit of inter-Arab politics it was in the 1950s and early 1960s. President Asad, a career officer and former head of the air force, reached the heights of power by carefully building a network of well-placed supporters in the army. He continues to maintain this system; his brother commands a key security unit, for example. Asad was a founding member of a group which has been dominant within the Syrian army -- the military organization of the Baath Party -- for over ten years. He survived many changes within that group until he came to control it himself.

The Arab *Socialist* Baath (Resurrection) Party is the vehicle through which Asad governs. Founded in Damascus a quarter century ago with the goals of liberating and uniting all Arab countries, it has been an important force seeking to develop socialism in an Arab framework. It has been plagued with factionalism, and rival Baath organizations now govern Iraq and

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Syria, each claiming to be the sole legitimate party. Broader Arab considerations were pushed into the background after the failure of Syria and Egypt to make a success of the United Arab Republic (1958-1961). Since taking power in 1963, the Baath and its soldiers have concentrated on Syrian concerns and interests, with particular attention to improving social and economic conditions for the rural areas from which its leaders came. Syria's socialism is a moderate one; half the economy is in private hands.

Key military figures, including President Asad, Defense Minister Talas, and Interior Minister Zaza, as well as a majority of cabinet members and civilian Baath Party leaders are from *provincial* towns and villages. These men have supplanted Syria's former rulers, who were drawn from merchant-absentee landlord families, centered in Damascus, Aleppo and other cities and were almost exclusively Sunni Muslim in religion.* In the late 1940s, when Hafiz al-Asad was a secondary school student, about to join the Baath Party, it was inconceivable that he, from an undistinguished provincial family and an Alawi as well, could become President of Syria. The position was legally reserved to a member of the dominant Sunni Muslim majority and an urban leader of that community always filled it. It is a measure of the change that the Baath and the soldiers have wrought in Syria that members of minority groups, once relegated to secondary status, now may legally occupy any position in the country.

The relative *youth* of Syria's leaders has meant that their politically formative years came after Syria won independence. In those years, the key political issue of the country came to be the struggle of nationalists and progressives against the traditional leadership exercised by important families which combined large land holdings, commercial interests and political

* Seventy percent of Syria's people are Sunni (orthodox) Muslims. Minorities, such as Alawi Muslims, who make up ten percent of the population, and Christians in the past could not aspire to the highest military and civilian posts. (See Annex for further detail.)

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power. Syria's leaders of today are less concerned with the imperialists as enemies than, say, Nasser was. Moreover, the Syrian rulers have conclusively worn out over the former ruling class.

Their Administration

Syria's leaders are proud of their record in office over the past decade. They have provided Syria with its longest stretch of stable government since independence. The only significant change between 1966 and the present occurred in November 1970 when Asad ousted his rivals within the Baath ruling group. Those rivals had born responsibility for the abortive Syrian military incursion into Jordan in support of the fedayeen in September 1970. Since Asad carried out his "corrective movement", as the event is known in Syria, he has extensively restaffed the upper echelons of the Party and government with his own supporters. Domestically, the Asad administration has done little that is different from its predecessor. It has pushed ahead improving the administration, trying to involve the population politically in a variety of mass political organizations, and working for economic betterment.

Politically, Syria is a country of the left; the center and right of Syrian politics were destroyed by the early 1960s. But it is a moderate leftism. Baath Party members hold the principal cabinet posts and dominate the administration, education, and the press. Other leftwing political movements, including the Communist Party, are included in a National Progressive Front, the cabinet, and a virtually powerless People's Assembly. Only the Baath is allowed to conduct political activity in the army.

Syrian pride and self respect at the achievements of recent years have undoubtedly been bolstered by the recent fighting, in which the Syrian forces gave a respectable account of themselves. It is in fact a measure of Asad's confidence in the solidarity of his position, in the degree of authority he had, and of Syrian self-confidence in general that he agreed with Sadat to plan the dual attack on Israel, and that they actually carried it out (this involved a degree of state-to-state cooperation and trust, unique in post-World War II Arab affairs).

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The Syrian Army has long been riven with factionalism, and this carries with it the possibility of efforts to change the leadership of the country by force. An attempt on Asad's life was made during the summer of 1973. Personal and factional infighting could, therefore, lead to Asad's ouster. Lacking extensive information on political attitudes of Syrian officers, we cannot gauge this with any precision. But the Syrian officer corps has, by virtue of its members' social origins and because advancement has been chiefly for loyalty to the Baath Party, become a fairly homogeneous group. If Asad were overthrown, his successor would most certainly be an officer of the Baath persuasion, sharing many of the same domestic social and economic goals. But Asad is noted for his pragmatism; a successor might be more of an ideologue or might not have the same views on foreign affairs.

Attitudes Toward External Matters

Syria has been a bitter opponent of Israel since 1948. In addition, Syria retains legacies deriving from a longstanding pro-Palestinian involvement. Damascus was an early and vigorous supporter of fedayeen extremist action against Israel. Since Asad took control, he has endeavored to make the fedayeen in Syria and, to the extent possible, in Lebanon responsive to the interests of the government in Damascus. But there is domestic opinion favoring Syrian policy strongly supportive of Palestinian rights. The existence of this opinion -- which is not measurable to any precise degree -- does put limitations on Syrian freedom, on how far and fast Asad could go in dealing with the Israelis. This is a constraint which, for example, does not effect Egypt to any serious extent.

Syria's relations with the West in modern times have been on the poor side. Damascus was a principal home of the Arab independence movement. Between the two world wars, Syrian politics consisted largely of a struggle to oust the French from the mandate over Syria. In the first decade of independence, Syrian politics centered on a struggle by nationalists and progressives to oust the conservative, monied landlord-merchant class, which looked to the West for support. Syria was an early opponent of US efforts to construct a Middle East defense grouping in the 1950s and otherwise to deny the Middle East to the Soviets.

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The Syrians have not let an antipathy to the West -- which has moderated some in recent years -- lead them into Eastern arms either. The Baathists are on good terms with a variety of communist and socialist parties and with communist states as diverse as Yugoslavia and North Korea. The Soviets are looked on as good friends, but Syria has avoided some of the closeness that Egypt and Iraq have from time to time exhibited. For Damascus, friendship with the Soviet Union is a two-way exchange, in which Syria gains certain advantages but which must not infringe on Syrian independence.

In the present tricky situation, Syria wants to get back territory, but is uncertain and afraid of playing a card lest it fail to win the point and the card be wasted. Hence, Damascus' propensity for letting others set the pace comes to the fore. Syria has backed part way into accepting Resolution 242, when other Arabs have openly done so, has agreed to receive the Secretary now that he has been welcomed in many other major Arab capitals, and probably will edge into other moves. The Syrians' attitude will continue to be one of caution, "how far can we go without losing face." It will probably be accompanied by a sort of truculence in handling matters which will involve inconsistencies. The Syrians did this in 1972, when they simultaneously made noises about improving relations with the US and held a travelling US diplomat prisoner for several weeks. They are doing something analagous now, holding Israeli war-prisoners, when release would seem to promise Israeli concessions in return.

The Syrians hate to be thought of as weak or subject to pressure. They have done a pretty good job of resisting outsiders both eastern and western, of building a new social system, of establishing themselves as important in Arab councils, and even of fighting Israel. But they are still not sure of themselves and of their position, and they continue to take refuge in truculence and negativism, attitudes which will be at least as apparent on the peace issue as on any other important Syrian interest.

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ANNEX
from
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DOMESTIC FACTORS IN THE SYRIAN SITUATION

The Political Role of the Armed Forces

1. The Syrian Army became a major factor in political life immediately after the French departed in 1946. It has ruled the country directly or in association with political groups for more than half the time since independence. It had a principal part in bringing Syria into the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958 and was the agent of the breakup of that union in 1961. Faction has succeeded faction in control of the armed forces over the past 25 years.

2. The Baath Party became the political instrument of the Syrian Army in the 1960s. Founded in Syria in the early 1940s, with the goals of freedom, socialism, and pan-Arab unity on a secular basis, it was a civilian party until 1963. During the era of the UAR, Syrian officers assigned to Egypt for what Nasser viewed as political unreliability, clandestinely founded a Baath military organization separate from the main Party. This group masterminded a coup on 8 March 1963, collaborating with civilian Baathists who shared their anti-Nasser and Syria-first sentiments, these officers took over the Party and ousted its founders in a second coup of February 1966.

3. The officers who came to dominate the army in the 1960s represent a sharp break with Syria's traditional political leaders. The latter had come from the landlord-merchant class, centered in the big cities and primarily Sunni Muslim. As the Syrian Army grew from a few thousand at independence to 30-40 thousand in the 1950s, it needed more officers. Under the mandate, the French had recruited security forces from rural areas and small towns, especially minority regions. With the city population lacking a tradition of military service, rural youth had substantial opportunity to seek economic and social advancement by enrolling in the military academy. The officer corps, now largely from rural backgrounds, contains a much greater number of members from minority groups than those groups' proportion in the total population. Alawi Muslims are especially prominent.

4. Many Syrian officers took up the Baath doctrines of secularism and moderate socialism (the Baath's goal of Arab unity lost much of its appeal during the UAR period). Once they rose to power, such officers sought to improve the lot of the peasants and of the lower middle classes from which they had come. Secularism, in the twin sense of giving

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less of an official place for Islam and of abolishing the practice of reserving certain posts for certain sects, had great appeal to the minority representatives and they have done much to advance it. Popular sentiment still insists that the president be a Muslim; the incumbent is an Alawi, in a post formerly reserved for a Sunni. But other positions in the cabinet or in the government are no longer reserved for members of particular sects. In the armed forces, of 13 prominent general officers, 4 are Alawis, 6 are Sunni, and 3, including the Chief of Staff, are Christian. (In the 1950s, a Christian officer could aspire only to head the veterinary or quartermaster corps.) Seats in the People's Council are now distributed on the basis of social origins (over half must be workers or peasants) in place of the former distribution on the basis of religion.

5. The Syrian armed forces are the regime's principal support; they include a 100,000-man army organized into three infantry and two armored divisions, an air force of 9,000 men and some 400 aircraft, a 7,500-man air defense force, and a navy of 2,000 men and 8 missile patrol boats. The military establishment accounts for half the regular budget. The army has had no difficulty in maintaining internal security on the few occasions it has been called upon to do so in recent years, but its record against external forces is poor. Israel seized the heavily-fortified Golan Heights in 24 hours in 1967, largely because of incompetent Syrian leadership. Jordan defeated and repulsed a Syrian tank force which moved to support fedayeen in 1970. The Syrian Army's competence has been adversely affected by the political ambitions of its members and by the policy of promotion and assignment for loyalty to the Party or its leader.

6. Syrian military personnel are also assigned in some numbers to *Saiqah*, the Damascus-sponsored fedayeen organization.

Through such personnel and through Baath Party militants in key positions, Syria maintains control over this organization.

The Governmental System

7. The soldiers run Syria in cooperation with and by using the Baath Party. Baath Party members hold the principal government cabinet posts, dominate the administration, education, and the press. There is a Damascus-based pan-Arab leadership, but the Party in Syria is run by a leadership for the country (the Regional Command), chosen at periodic party congresses. Here, as in the army, Alawi Muslims are especially prominent. There are party units for each province and for each district within a province. At all levels there exist interlocking relationships among party, army, and civil administration; for example, provincial governors and police chiefs are frequently members of the provincial party leadership. There is little opportunity for those outside the pyramid of executive authority to affect decisions.

8. Syria's formal governmental structure includes a President, Prime Minister, and a Cabinet; the relative power of these offices has varied under different regimes. From 1966 to 1970, power was exercised by a group of top level military (and civilian) Baathists; no one person dominated all aspects of policy (Asad was one of the group); President Nur-al-din Atasi was substantially a figurehead. For the past two years Asad has been both President and head of the Baath Party and is clearly the ruling figure. He has maintained control of the country by: (a) insuring that officers loyal to him are in charge of key military and security units, and (b) reorganizing the Party and placing members loyal to him in key government and Party posts as well as in the directing committees of mass organizations.

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9. The Syrian Government is highly authoritarian. Nonetheless, in the last six years or so, successive governments have tried to instill a sense of popular participation among the citizenry through: (a) the development of mass organizations for almost every conceivable economic, professional, and social group in the country, e.g., peasants, artisans, petroleum workers, teachers, bureaucrats, students, women, and so on. Total membership of these groups runs into the hundred thousands; Baathists are invariably to be found in their national ruling committees, but infrequently below that level, (b) local administrative councils, elected in March 1972; while these have limited power, the elections were fairly free and many Baathists failed to win election, (c) a recently elected People's Council of 186 members, of whom 95 are workers and peasants as required by the constitution. Its authority is limited to debating cabinet policy, ratifying laws, and approving laws laid down by the executive. A third to a half of the members are Baathists.

10. The Asad regime has also recognized the existence of other left-wing political movements by including them in the National Progressive Front. The Front is dominated by the Baath, which provides the chairman (Asad) and eight of 16 seats on the governing board, but gives legal status to four other organizations; the Communist Party, the pro-Egyptian Arab Socialist Union, the Socialist Unionists (composed of ex-Baathists and also pro-Egyptians), and the Arab Socialists (followers of Akram Hawrani, a powerful politician in the 1950s). Each of these movements is also represented in the Cabinet. The terms on which the Front was founded permit only the Baath Party to conduct political activity in the army. The influence of the other groups is limited, but their leaders act as if they believe that such a modest position is preferable

to inactivity or to functioning clandestinely under oppressive controls—which had been their fate in the past.

11. In sum, Syria's post-revolutionary style is that of a one-party system. The route to power in Syria lies through the Baath Party, particularly through its military organization. Civilian party members can also achieve responsible positions in the administration, but they must be prepared to serve the wishes of the soldiers who dominate it and who have the force to back up their wishes. Those presently in power have been influential within the party and the army for a dozen years or more and the government is no longer prone to the wild swings in government policy that characterized Syria in the 1950s.

The Economy

12. Ten years of Baath rule has provided a continuity of administration which has had beneficial effects on the economy, in contrast to the frequent changes which characterized Syria in the 1950s. There are changes in personnel from time to time of course, but on the whole the provincial governors, directors-general, and administrators of various projects stay around long enough to learn their jobs and to carry out government policies with a certain degree of confidence that a given program will be completed, not interrupted by political upheaval. Administrative performance is far from miraculous, there is a substantial amount of inefficiency, and slowness in implementation is common. Thus the last of the land expropriated from large landholders beginning in 1958, was distributed to the peasants only in 1969.

13. Nonetheless, there has been substantial progress in building an economic and social infrastructure. School population has about doubled in the past 10 years, with over half of school-age children now in class. Farms are

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privately owned but a large percentage of owners are enrolled in agricultural cooperatives which provide some fundamental agricultural services. There has been steady progress in improving the rail and road network. The former has nearly doubled in mileage with a new railroad being built from the coast to the far northeast corner of the country. Paved road mileage has increased by 50 percent in the last five years. The largest single project is the great dam on the Euphrates River. The first stage was completed in July 1973, it will bring a million and a half acres under irrigation over a period of some years, more than doubling Syria's irrigated land and reducing dependence on erratic rainfall, allowing settlement of nomads, and adding greatly to electric power production.

14. Over the past 10 years Syria has enjoyed steady economic growth, averaging nearly five percent annually in the 1966-1970 period, even though agricultural production virtually stagnated, and well over 10 percent in each of the years 1971 and 1972, reaching a gross domestic product (GDP) of about \$2 billion in the latter year. There have, however, been yearly fluctuations in GDP due mostly to the changes in agricultural production, which provides over 20 percent of GDP. Since most farming depends on rainfall, output can fluctuate plus or minus 30 percent from normal. The state runs industry, banks, foreign trade, and utilities, but nearly half of GDP is provided by the private sector—services, small industrial establishments, and agriculture. Some of the spectacular increase in economic performance in 1971-1972 was due to President Assad's partly successful efforts to induce those who have fled Syria for political reasons to repatriate their capital and to encourage the private sector in other ways. The main factor, especially in 1972, was good rainfall, which permitted a record year for grain.

15. Syria's balance of payments has been in deficit since 1968, but the deficit began to shrink in 1971, and the results for 1973 are likely to be a very small deficit or even a small surplus. Before 1968, a large trade gap, varying greatly from year to year in response to weather conditions but constantly growing, had usually been covered by receipts from other sources—e.g., oil pipeline fees, tourism, workers' remittances. In the wake of the 1967 war, tourism receipts and transfers from Syrians abroad fell off, and remained in the doldrums. By 1971, however, capital began flowing back into the country. Grain crops set a record in 1972, and 1973 is another bumper crop year; this helps both to hold imports down and to increase exports. Oil exports have grown to over 4 million tons, which probably earned some \$50 million, in 1972. The major export, cotton, has held its own in recent years, earning about \$80-\$90 million annually. Most significantly for the future, Syria renegotiated the agreements pertaining to oil transit fees through Tapline (from Saudi Arabia) in 1971 and through the IPC line in 1971 and again in 1972. As a result, the net foreign exchange income from oil pipeline activities should amount to \$160 million or more in 1973 and subsequent years, compared to \$84 million in 1970. Moreover, Syria's improved relations with its Arab neighbors have paid off in substantial grants.

16. The increased inflow of income and a large increase in Syria's use of bilateral trade credits permitted the Syrian Central Bank to increase its holdings of gold and foreign exchange by almost half in 1972, to about \$125 million (3-4 months of imports) at the end of the year. By mid-1973, Syria had a foreign debt of almost \$900 million (some \$350 million economic and \$550 million military)—

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mostly to the Communist countries.⁹ Payments on the debt apparently come to less than \$40 million annually, however, since the Soviets agreed to Syrian pleas in 1969 and 1971 and rescheduled the debt to them to permit payment of interest only (about \$7 million a year) through 1975. Payments to all creditors thus are exceeded by annual drawings on economic credits. Recently the Syrians have been having some luck borrowing in the West; at this juncture it appears that about half the \$300 million in foreign credit needed to finance planned public investment during 1971-1975 will come from the Communist countries and about half from Western sources such as international lending agencies, France, and Japan.

17. The policy of the Baath regime aims at making a more modern economy for its population of seven million which is growing at over three percent a year. But it has many

⁹ The estimated value of military deliveries since 1956 totals some \$1 billion (\$900 million from the USSR and \$100 million from other Communist countries) about half was delivered between 1 January 1970 and June 1973. Prices have, however, been discounted about \$400 million, and some \$75 million of the debt has been repaid.

problems to face, including the burden of a costly military establishment, which the regime feels is necessary to face external foes and because it leans heavily on the army for support. Military and security expenditures account for a quarter of total budget expenditures (half the regular budget), current expenditures in non-security categories for another quarter and the remainder for investment, divided equally among agriculture, industry/mining, and transportation/public works.

18. Prospects for growth during the Third Plan period (1971-1975) are good, something above an average annual growth in real terms of eight percent. There is likely to be fairly rapid industrial growth in certain fields such as textiles, oil and phosphates. There will be increasing agricultural production as new irrigation works are finished and through improvements in technology. Increases in foreign exchange and earnings through oil transit revenues and other exports will be of benefit. In short, Syria has laid the groundwork for further advance in the economic sector in the rest of the 1970s.

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